

**Interview with John Henris
conducted by Sue Kovach Shuman for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

July 21, 2010

Sue: Hi, it's July 21st 2010 and I am Sue Kovach Shuman and I'm interviewing John Henris of Fairfax. Welcome, this is for the Providence District History project of Supervisor Smyth's office. Thanks for being here. Now you didn't grow up in this area am I right?

John: Right.

Sue: Okay, where were you born and what brought you to Fairfax County?

John: I was born in Presque Isle, Main actually in 1964; but my family moved to Florida soon thereafter and I grew up in central Florida until I graduated college and I met my wife in college at the University of Central Florida. And our first jobs were in south Florida. But we were both familiar with the Washington, D.C. area; I was more familiar because I had family here. I had family in the State Department. They lived in the area as I was growing up so we would visit and I always loved Washington, the museums and the fact that there were so many and they were so great. And they were free and always had fun as a kid visiting. And my wife and I were lamenting one evening that we didn't think there was enough culture, enough museums and plays and entertainment like that. We were thinking of an area we might like to move to and Washington immediately came to both our minds.

Sue: Where did you go to school, to college?

John: University of Central Florida.

Sue: Okay.

John: So actually my wife picked up the phone and made a plane reservation right then and came up to Washington and found – she was in sales she was – it was a little easier for her to move around and she got a job. Well came to visit,

we had some family up here; my brother had moved up. And she came to visit, found a job and so I came after and that was in 1991. And we've been here ever since. We wouldn't want, we've traveled all around the country and we wouldn't dream of living anywhere else.

Sue: What keeps you here?

John: Ah, in large part the same thing that attracted us, the ah, we love Washington it's a big city in so many senses but it's also not. It's not quite like New York, we like to visit New York, but New York can be crowded and dirty and hectic. And Washington has its crowds especially when the tourists are around but there's something about the marble architecture and so we enjoy that. But as much as we enjoy that, we like living, we like living close to Washington so we can visit; but we like living in Northern Virginia with the trees. We live in the Mantua neighborhood which is, we feel just so fortunate. It's like we say we live in a tree house because there's these woods around that we get to enjoy all the time. What keeps us here frankly is that; we love where we live and we love its proximity to Washington.

Sue: Now you are an engineer?

John: A software engineer.

Sue: Software engineer okay. And tell me a little bit about Life Stories, what it is and how that started.

John: That started in 2007, I had begun in 2006 um we have two children who are now 14 and 15. And in 2006 I was anxious to get them involved in something that brought their attention to the world beyond their toys and such; especially around Christmas. So I was familiar – when we first moved here we lived for a while in Annandale and I was familiar with the Sleepy Hollow Nursing Home there right near where we lived. And I thought it would be a good idea maybe do something around Christmas time for the folks with the kids and for the folks in the nursing home; and thought though that it might be strange to walk into a nursing home as a stranger and say “hey can I can we throw a party for your residents” – just out of the blue.

So I did some investigating and found there is an organization called Little Brothers Friends to the Elderly that did not have any activity in our area and I said – I told them what I would like to do and if I could associate with them, which I did. And so that was 2006, December. For Christmas Day we hosted a Christmas Party for City Hall Nursing Home and have done that every Christmas Day since. But it was very rewarding for the whole family.

We, I wanted the kids to, and we invite their friends and other folks to volunteer and I wanted it to be as much about the kids hosting the party as me. So I have kind of a routine where we come in and get set up and then we spend time with the seniors.

Sue: What do they set up?

John: We set up a, we bring in food; some food we get at the grocery store, some stuff we make depending on; over time we've gotten to know some of the residents and you know what they like so. We set up like a buffet table at the end of the main room there at top of the Nursing Home.

Sue: And holiday foods? Hors d'oeuvres

John: And Christmas time we'd bring in lots of Christmas trees. We do other parties throughout the year. Fourth of July we'll often, do, cook hamburgers on the grill out back. And we'll decorate some although the nursing home there is often already decorated. But the point is the kids have set up the buffet and then they take most of the residents who come can't come to the table; so the kids serve them – bring the food out - Ask what folks want and bring the food out to them.

Sue: How many young people, how many kids – teenagers are involved doing this or is it just teenagers, its adults, teenagers maybe young adults also?

John: It ranges, we've had young kids all the way up to other adults volunteering. And it's ranged, over the years we've had a good number of volunteers. Where we'd have maybe 25 or 30 folks volunteering with a bunch of children too as is common I think with any volunteer activity it waxes and wanes. The last two

parties have been myself and the two kids. But they've gotten good at it so we can pull that off.

Sue: Now how many residents are at Sleepy Hollow, approximately? You know I'm not even sure, it's got a couple of wings, so it's in the hundred's. We get a small subset that come up. Because there are a lot of folks at Sleepy Hollow that just aren't mobile or they have Alzheimer's.

Sue: What are their age ranges do you know.

John: Starting in the 60's depending on sometimes folks can be younger but be incapacitated. Too, there's some folks there over a hundred and we bring in – there's a band that I've associated with, a trio that does jazz music from the thirties and forties that we bring in there.

Sue: What's the name of the jazz band?

John: They're called Reverie.

Sue: Reverie.

John: They are a treat, their lead singer dresses in period and has a working microphone that looks like a forties style. When they are performing it is, you can see, even though it's many of the residents can't move too much. You can see it in their eyes and in their tapping feet.

Sue: They enjoy that.

John: Yeah the music gets really connected with them; more so than anything else we've done.

Sue: And this group volunteers it's time when it does this?

John: No.

Sue: You pay for that?

John: Yes, I've raised money through the company I work for Northrop Grumman has donated since the very beginning and they've been the chief reason we've

been allowed to do things like bring in Reverie. But pardon me all this is leading up to – that's been going on for a while and it's very rewarding and I thought I'd also like to connect with seniors who are – other seniors who are out there not necessarily in not just those that are in Sleepy Hollow Nursing Home. And I thought Life Stories would – which is a program where we bring a small group of seniors to a school to be interviewed and I realized I needed – it would be a better idea to go get some seniors who are a little more mobile and that um to participate in that event.

So I just walked in the front door of the Little River Glen Senior Center right here at

Sue: At Rt. 236 and Pickett.

John: Exactly. And I was lucky, I walked in there and I had a look on my face I'm sure that caught the attention of the Director who happened to be standing in the room. She came up and asked, Karen Gasper – she asked if she could help me and I said I'm looking for the Director. And she's so busy I was really lucky that I just happened to be – that I walked in there – that she was there – cause she's a special lady. And I told her I have this idea of doing these parties idea and bringing some of your seniors to a school. You know she didn't know me from Adam but we talked for a bit and she was intrigued; so we agreed to meet again. And I started planning and she got excited. And as I said she is a special lady and she loves her work and I was so fortunate to find that she has a great relationship with those seniors there. So she worked to find seniors that – and mind you that took a while especially early on. They were understandably hesitant – now we don't know this guy he wants to put us in his car and drive us away somewhere.

Sue: The Senior Center is a retirement home?

John: Right, it's a retirement home but also some folks live there but

Sue: Is it assisted living or

John: I think it is – I'm not sure if it's assisted or not but a lot of the folks just come there for the day.

Sue: Okay.

John: Um, so Karen found a group of seniors who would agree to be guinea pigs for us and we took them that first time, 2007 we started this, to Mantua elementary school. And we took four seniors. And that went very well and I – it was young elementary school kids so it was interesting. Beforehand I had made up a little time line to give the kids something and I tried to put on the timeline a timeline that went through the 20th century. And I tried to put things on the time line that the kids would identify with.

Sue: Such as?

John: When the game of monopoly was invented.

Sue: Oh, okay.

John: When the first iPod came out and I tried to go back in time to things they would recognize. When the first car was made and but to give the kids a way to look at and associate the birthday or more often and what was interesting was, you know, when you were my age the kids would think was was going on? And that was effective.

Sue: How old were these seniors?

John: That first group ranged, we had a young lady who was like our volunteer who was in her sixties and up to – we've done a lot of these so I don't remember the exact group we had then. But probably, Betty might have come then, so we had someone probably as old as in their eighties. But we've taken people over a hundred a number of times; which has been a treat in itself.

Sue: So do you go along and observe when the seniors come into speak to students still have you got time

John: Oh yeah.

Sue: Oh, okay so your

John: What we do

Sue: technically involved in all of this.

John: Oh yes.

Sue: Okay.

John: We've found; we've tried it a number of different ways and the way that works best is we bring them in to a room usually a library where there are individual tables and we can set a senior down with the group of six to eight kids. It's much more comfortable for the seniors. We tried once putting all the seniors up in front of the whole class and that's quite intimidating to stand up there with a microphone and without having prepared.

Sue: How old are the children?

John: They started at the elementary school and we had as young as third grade and as old as fifth. But what Karen and I realized after the first year and we took a number of visits to Mantua Elementary in that first year and we realized as much fun as it was we realized older kids would be able to identify more with the fact that these folks lived through a lot of things that, you know, are significant and interesting. So that's why we moved it to the next year where we've done it two years now at Woodson High School. And we've met there with 10th, 11th, and 12th graders.

Sue: Is this done as part of the curriculum or what class?

John: It hasn't been yet, it's been very specialized. You know we will – I have a person to coordinate with at the school and they'll find a teacher who will be interested in this. But it's kind of ranged and it been based on a teacher that's expressed and interest. We're hoping with this next coming school year to start to aim more at specific curricula. Because what we realize is that in the Northern Virginia area, holy cow, the number of fascinating retired people with you know state department retirees, military retirees, scientists. We are just rich with vibrant, intelligent, well-spoken retirees. And I realize good grief why not put them in these rooms because the experience we've had when we bring them in

the room has been just moving, to say the least. It's not unusual for these things to end with everybody crying.

Sue: Give me a sample of that kind of thing, what happens.

John: Well for one like um Betty B. tells, Betty tells - hold on I wrote her name I just, everybody calls her Betty B. because her last name is Biskowski. She is one of the residents from Little River Glenn (*Senior Center*) that we have taken on a number of visits. She was born in England and was a child and a young teen during the blitz and she tells the story of – when the bombing started being separated from her family; sent out with her sister into the country to live with strangers.

Sue: And we're talking what year approximately would this be?

John: Probably 1942.

Sue: 1942 okay.

John: Thereabouts.

Sue: Okay.

John: And she ends up, I mean it's a Dickensian story; she ends up in a miserable household. And her sister, her younger sister whose – she's taking care of is even more miserable and they leave and they walk back to London to be with their mom in the city as the bombs are falling. And she tells the stories of being – the sirens going off at night, having to rush out of their flat and get into the basement of, you know a nearby building. And the story of one particular instance when they – she's walking back from school with a friend and there was a bombing and they rushed – took cover, they were next to a building that they were familiar with and they came back out and the building was destroyed. And many of the people that they knew that lived there they could see had just died.

Sue: And so she tells the children and it becomes real and it's not just something in the history book and they all are emotional with her.

John: Yes, it's

Sue: Yes, um do you intend to continue this program as often as possible. I mean you're getting positive feedback from you said the teachers at Woodson

John: Oh yeah, teachers like it.

Sue: bringing in the history.

John: The seniors, it's ah probably my favorite story of what's gone so far is – it also involves Betty B., that same lady. She got a letter from one of the students, actually she had two great incidents but this one – she got a letter from a student thanking her saying that he went home and told his parents the story that she had told them and he was telling her in the letter that they were amazed and they said you should make your life story into a movie. But he put this into a letter and she carries that letter around it's so special to her. And months later when I came back after that and she had gotten the letter and I had come back to set up another visit and she saw me – she was out at the Senior Center and saw me and came running and gave me a hug and we chatted and she told me about this letter and still she thinks about it often and has it with her a lot. I mean this is making a great impact on the seniors. They really feel first of all – all the students in the Fairfax County Schools have been marvelous so respectful and so seniors feel great about the contribution they are making. The students are listening, they're asking questions. So they feel like they are contributing to their education. And all the ones we have taken are anxious to go again. They tell the other seniors at the other Senior Centers so we're starting to get interest there. The teachers love it; they usually end up all huddled around the tables with the kids listening to the stories.

So we are anxious to – we're going to go back to Woodson and certainly we're going to try doing as I mentioned earlier I think some more specialized visits that where we say hey here's a retired State Department employee or a retired military commander would that contribute, would you like to have them come in on a particular day when you're at a particular point in your lesson plan and add to the conversation.

Sue: Do you think this helps the students to see other generations, their own grandparents, and older people in a different way.

John: Oh, I do, I do even specially ones whose grandparents have died. Betty B. again had a girl befriended her from one of our visits and would come to visit her a couple of times at the Senior Center, so they connected.

Sue: Outside the Life Stories program they're forming friendships, bonding.

John: Exactly.

Sue: Building bonds between the generations. But I see you have been tearing up as you speak about this so it's very personal to you.

John: Yeah, it's been moving.

Sue: What do your children tell you afterwards about this when they come back? Do they ever say much?

John: My own children, in Life Stories it's only been once. Mine aren't at Woodson yet; so my daughter was in actually she was in the first one at Mantua Elementary. And I used her to – how was it – she was young at the time but she gave me positive feedback. I'm looking forward to having my kids – my son's going to be at Woodson starting next year so I'm looking forward to having one of these events where he'll show up. And then my daughter will be there the year after where she shows up. I've heard, what's interesting is the kids talk about it a little bit because my son told me once that another child said oh your Dad brought in the old folks and it was really cool. So I was glad to hear that even just a little bit that word gets around like that.

Sue: Has there been anything where the students have invited the people back for any of the celebrations at the school for the holidays? Not quite yet?

John: We've talked about it, we've talked about doing a like a – at their prom; doing a combination event. But we weren't able to pull that off but that would be fun. I am sure that that would be fun.

Sue: Yes, I think that has been done some places; that does sound like a lot of fun.

John: Yeah, but I haven't been involved with anything other than the actual visits where we can come in.

Sue: Let me ask you a little bit about other things in Providence District in Fairfax County. You told me what kind of things you like about this area; but what about – what don't you like – is there anything that you think maybe could be improved in the quality of life?

John: Probably, certainly traffic can be difficult although this sounds perhaps disingenuous but really we are very happy here. We have traveled all around and we've taken note of the fact that we are very happy where we live. There are the normal sorts of difficulties like I said the traffic. It's notoriously difficult I understand to predict the weather around here so sometimes we get surprised, but that – none of those things really bother us. So I can honestly tell you that there's nothing that I think about that I really wish was different.

Sue: Is there anything you would like to add that I didn't ask about Life Stories or about anything?

John: Not that I can think of; I could go on about the stories that the seniors.

Sue: Well give us another sample or two.

John: There are some great ones. We had Miss King, Miss Allie King was a resident at Little River Glenn, she's since moved to one of the other senior centers. Which, by the way there's another thing that Karen and want to start to organize in the next year, school year and that's to get other Senior Centers to do the same thing.

But we took Miss King on a couple of visits. She is over a hundred years old they say; you wouldn't believe it to see her. She is lovely and articulate; she is the granddaughter of slaves and has a fascinating story. She was – her parents had to really – she was the oldest child in the family and her dad was a farmer and he took her out of school in elementary at some point because she had to be his

plowingette because they didn't have money enough for him to hire someone and the family had to eat. So it's very moving to – it's moving to hear her, she feels bad about that. When she's talking to the kids she could have continued more schooling

Sue: To be in school.

John: but she paid attention to the world and she just has many stories to tell.

Sue: Did she raise a family?

John: She did and some are still around here.

Sue: And what part of this area?

John: I don't know. Actually I apologize.

Sue: Oh, no don't apologize.

John: I don't know but – go ahead.

Sue: That's okay.

John: We had – Karen took her in to the presidential election of 2008 Karen took her to vote. It was important to her obviously with Barrack Obama running to vote, and Karen took her to the polling place to vote. And it was later that week at one of our visits so that was really neat for the kids to be able to hear about her.

Sue: And how important that was.

John: Exactly, exactly. We also have had Nick Pergola; we've taken him to a number of visits. He's a retired White House photographer; I think he's 90 now. And we are so fortunate that on most trips he's brought his photo album with lots of extra photos that he's taken - some recognizably famous. You know there's a famous photo I think of L.B.J. holding his dog by its ears that Nick took. And there are some shots in the White House of the young Kennedy children. He started working in the Roosevelt Administration and retired during the Carter

Administration I think. President Carter still sends him Christmas cards which makes him very proud understandably.

Sue: Thank you.

John: Certainly.

Part 2 of 2 parts.

Sue: This is continuing with John Henris. John, you were just telling me one of the nice things about living in Mantua.

John: Yes.

Sue: Tell us about that fish pond.

John: Yes, my brother and his family also live in Mantua and they have a pond on their property that is not all that big but surprisingly it had been stocked by the owners before they moved there eight or 10 years ago. It had been stocked with fish and it has remained healthy and it has a huge fish population – and so much so that you can – when you go fishing there you don't even have to bait your hook. You can drop in and this is the truth because I've done it many times. You can drop in an unbaited hook and usually within minutes and catch a fish. There are catfish, sunfish, bass. I don't know that much about fish; I've seen many different kinds of fish come out of there we put them all back.

Sue: How big is the pond?

John: Ah.

Sue: The size of a house, bigger?

John: Bigger than that, maybe the size of a couple of house footprints.

Sue: Wow.

John: Two or three house footprints.

Sue: Wow, in Mantua, so I guess you won't starve as long as you live right around that little pond.

John: Right. It's been, we've both been leading years of Cub Scout troops in there and my wife is leader for Girl Scout troops. So it has been a practice at least for a few years now to bring the troops by so that all the kids get to experience catching a fish. They don't all experience getting to put the fish back.

Sue: You catch and release. (Laughing)

John: Right, right, exactly. Often they catch the fish and then scream and then an adult comes over and unhooks it.

Sue: What fun, thanks very much.